

Swipe (1981)

by Gordon Pengilly

Gordon is one of those Canadian playwriting treasures insufficiently recognized in this country.

~ PLAYWRIGHT SHARON POLLOCK QUOTED IN HUNT

It is difficult to disagree with theatre historian E. Ross Stuart's assessment of Gordon Pengilly's critically acclaimed *Swipe*, a play that explores blind faith and its value to humanity. In Canadian theatre, Stuart notes, a fantasy play, particularly one set on a run-down Mississippi riverboat, is an "oddity" (Stuart 235). Indeed, Ron Wigmore—longtime Walterdale member and member of the selection committee that awarded Pengilly's play top spot in the company's 1980/81 national playwriting competition—anticipated Stuart's assessment by offering context from among the sixty-three other plays submitted to the competition: "We had Women's Lib themes, peace-in-our-time plays, parents trying to cope with disabled children, two or three very competent little comedies.[...] In terms of language, subject matter, structure [*Swipe*] was a sheer delight to read" (quoted in Ashwell, "Winner"). It was also a delight to watch. The *Edmonton Journal* called it a "marvelously lusty flight of fancy [...]. The play is escapist, absurdist... and absolutely entertaining. [T]he superbly mysterious and evocative set by Phil Switzer and the electric direction by Larry Farley could not be more professional" (Ashwell, "Flight"). The success of Pengilly's "tragicomic fantasy" at the Walterdale competition provides food for thought in the context of a Canadian theatre atmosphere that teems with politically topical new plays. That it succeeded within the structure of a national writing competition is indicative of the way theatre has been nurtured in Canada.

The maturation myth that has come to define the "growth" of theatre in Canada from birth to adolescence to maturity—akin to what scholar Alan Filewod has called the "anthropomorphism" of Canadian nationalism (62)—has been nursed, in no small part, by competitions and awards variously arranged at the regional, provincial,

and national levels. From the Musical and Dramatic Competition (1907–11) initiated by competitive rugby fan and ninth governor general of Canada Earl Grey, to the forty-year landmark Dominion Drama Festival (1932–71), to contemporary regional theatre awards such as the Elizabeth Sterling Haynes Awards in Edmonton, the Betty Mitchell Awards in Calgary, and the Dora Mavor Moore Awards in Toronto, Canadian theatre practices, both amateur and professional, have been built from above by rewarding notable plays that satisfy diverse criteria with any combination of trophies, money, or first or further production. Competitions serve three important public purposes: they celebrate the “best” among eligible entries, they celebrate all constitutive entries by proclaiming (implicitly or explicitly) the strength of the field, and they celebrate the population and the geography from which the entries originate. Yet ironically, by awarding *Swipe* a top national prize, Walterdale’s committee eschewed political topicality for more fantastical themes.

Walterdale’s playwriting contest was local in funding, provincial in name, and national in range. In the spring of 1980 Walterdale applied for and received \$8,500 from the City of Edmonton to organize, adjudicate, and award a prize for the best full-length play in a national playwriting competition to be held in honour of Alberta’s 75th anniversary.³³ Over the course of ten months between April 1980 and February 1981 a selection committee of notable Walterdale members Ron Wigmore, Troy Sprenke, Frank Glenfield, and artistic director Vivien Bosley was organized, contest criteria set, and a national press release dispersed. The winning entry would receive \$1,500 and a full production as the last show of Walterdale’s 1980/81 season, with Wigmore slated to direct it.³⁴ During the fall of 1980, while Walterdale’s board was dealing with controversies related to its season productions of *Zastrozzi* and *Mutants*, the subcommittee was preparing to choose the winner of the new play competition. Diverse scripts from across Canada had poured in, and by November sixty-four entries were ready to be distributed for blind adjudication. *Swipe*, then titled *The Apprentice of Swipe*, eventually emerged as the selection committee’s unanimous favourite.

Along with Brad Fraser’s play and the second Walterdale production of Warren Graves’s *The Mumberly Inheritance*, *Swipe* was one of three plays written by Albertans to be staged at Walterdale during that provincial commemorative season, and it already had an extensive history. The play was conceived as a 1978 Alberta Theatre Projects commission titled *Rooster and the Captain*, which “fell through for ‘political’ reasons” (Ashwell, “Winner”). Pengilly rewrote it at the Banff Playwrights Colony in 1979 as *The Apprentice of Swipe*. It then underwent a three-day Workshop West workshop in 1980 (while he was playwright-in-residence and a board member there) before winning the Walterdale competition. At the time it represented a turning point in Pengilly’s writing. As he entered his late twenties with *Swipe*, he moved from darker writing to what he called “a new whimsy” (quoted in Ashwell, “Winner”). It was yet another success in Pengilly’s impressive oeuvre.

Award-winning playwright and theatre advocate Gordon Pengilly was born in Lethbridge in 1953 and raised on a farm south of there. Throughout the 1970s he lived in Edmonton, finishing a BA in drama at the University of Alberta in 1975, followed by an MFA in playwriting in 1978, the first person to receive that degree at the U. of A.

He has written over fifty works for the stage, radio, television, and film and has won a dozen provincial, national, and international playwriting competitions, including a 2007 BBC International Radio Playwriting award for *Seeing in the Dark* (out of 1,200 entries) and a number of screenwriting awards, including the Writers Guild of Canada Jim Burt Prize for screenwriting for *Drumheller or Dangerous Times* (2003).³⁵ He has been playwright-in-residence and associate playwright at a number of theatre companies across Canada, including Workshop West Theatre, Northern Light Theatre, Theatre Network, Theatre Calgary, Theatre New Brunswick, and the Banff Centre for the Arts, as well as theatres in Red Deer and Toronto. His contribution to Alberta writing at the time of and following Walterdale's production of *Swipe* is remarkable: instructor for a number of playwriting workshops across Alberta (sponsored by Alberta Playwrights' Network, Workshop West Theatre, Theatre Calgary, and Alberta Culture), reading staff at The Citadel Theatre and the CBC, editor of *Dandelion Magazine*, and dramaturge for Alberta Playwrights' Network. His plays have been produced internationally in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Holland, Germany, Japan, and Australia.³⁶ Today he lives in Calgary.

Though it appeared in the same remarkable season as plays by Fraser and George F. Walker, *Swipe* shares none of their edgy controversies. Years later, Pengilly described his play as "highly poetic. It's nearly written in a kind of meter form. And it's set in a kind of ether zone, which means that it's not in any recognizable place, it's sort of a place in someone's head, if you like.[...] It has spoken songs in it, several of them, and otherwise it's very consciously rhythmic" (Pengilly).³⁷ The philosophical fantasy play is set in a lagoon where the paddlewheel steamer *Empress* lies wrecked. Chief thief Peck Woodstick rules over the other tramps and his young apprentice Rooster. When Peck reports that their mystical old friend Clancy will finally return from the stars to bring them all "transcendence," expectations mount until Peck is exposed for the liar that he is. After the tramps deal with Peck in revenge for his deception, Rooster rekindles Clancy's legend and keeps the myth alive.

Swipe opened as *The Apprentice of Swipe* May 19–30, 1981, at Walterdale Playhouse (firehall) with the following cast and creative team:

GUPPY	Pierre Lafontain
DUKE	Bob Brophy
WORM	Troy Sprenke
PECK WOODSTICK	Frank Glenfield
ROOSTER	Jim Farley
BECKY	Bethany Ellis
TINKER	<i>not in Walterdale premiere</i>
DIRECTOR	Larry Farley
SET DESIGNER	Phil Switzer
LIGHTING DESIGNER	Luciano Iogna

COSTUME DESIGNER Jackie Bland and Phil Switzer
PROPERTIES Larry Lawson
SOUND J.E. Lyszkiewicz and Carla Nolan
STAGE MANAGER Larry Savage
PRODUCER Ron Wigmore

Swipe then ran December 5, 1981, to January 5, 1982, at Toronto Free Theatre, produced by the NDWT Company, with the following cast and creative team:

DUKE Patrick Sinclair
WORM Kay Hawtrey
GUPPY, TINKER Jerry Franken
PECK WOODSTICK David Fox
BECKY Denise Naples
ROOSTER James Crammond

DIRECTOR Keith Turnbull
MUSIC Patrick Godfrey
SET DESIGNER Sue LePage
COSTUME DESIGNER Ingrid Hamster
LIGHTING Robert Thomson
STAGE MANAGER Susan Monis

Swipe was also produced at the University of Lethbridge February 9–17, 1990, with the following cast and creative team:

DUKE Jim Wright
WORM Michelle Fuller
GUPPY Roger Hamm
PECK WOODSTICK Tom Gillespie
BECKY Tammy Kovacs
ROOSTER Brad Erickson
TINKER Ron Christensen

DIRECTOR Ches Skinner
MUSIC COMPOSER Lael Johnston
SET, COSTUME, AND LIGHTING DESIGN Terry A. Bennett
SOUND DESIGN Neil Sheets and Lael Johnston
STAGE MANAGER Tracy Cook

Swipe was previously published in Denis Salter, ed., *New Canadian Drama 3: Albertan Dramatists* (Ottawa: Borealis, 1984). The author has since reworked the play into the present version.

Swipe

by Gordon Pengilly

Characters GUPPY }
DUKE } *The aging lagoon tramps*
WORM }

PECK WOODSTICK, *An old tramp with a captain's hat, a bum leg, and a wooden stick*

ROOSTER, *A young tramp with fiery-red hair, Peck's apprentice of swipe*

BECKY, *A young runaway*

TINKER, *An old, blind tinkerman*

Setting Evening in the thick of a blue-dark lagoon.

Note An act break can be inserted after Becky's cry for police.

"Hope never leaves a wretched man that seeks her."

~ BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER, *THE CAPTAIN*



Rooster (Jim Farley) petitions Peck Woodstick (Frank Glenfield) as Becky (Bethany Ellis) looks on in Gordon Pengilly's *Swipe* (produced at Walterdale as *The Apprentice of Swipe*), May 1981. Photo: C.W. Hill Photography for Walterdale Theatre Associates.

An old paddle wheel steamer, christened “Empress,” sits wrecked in a blue-dark lagoon surrounded by bramble. It is heeled and sunk in mud and weed such that the lower deck is nearly at ground level. A ribbed plank bridges the deck to the ground. A rickety ladder leads up to the hurricane deck and steering station. The paddle wheel rests forlornly in the lagoon. The Empress is a portrait of heartbreak – so weathered, worn and rotting.

It is evening. A ribbon of red sky will gradually give way to nightfall and storm clouds.

Three old river Tramps, two men and a woman, are standing together in the mud beside the boat gazing into the sky.

- DUKE We are the tramps of this lagoon.
- WORM Our time is sworn to come.
- GUPPY If fiddles were pickles...
- DUKE And pillage were ham...
- WORM This legend would fit inna bun.
- DUKE Once upon a timeless moon
 the moon picked a partner.
 A golden bolt of moonlightning
 poked its hot finger
 into the green eye of Clancy Dougal
 and evaporated him into thin air.
 Such wuz the fate of Clancy Dougal
 Fer nobuddy’s seen him since.
- GUPPY Oh, there was magic in that tramp.
- WORM He come and took over the wheel.
- DUKE He danced and he fiddled...
- GUPPY That put lumps in your guff...
- DUKE And he stole like a breeze picked dandelion fluff.
- WORM Then one day Clancy hadda vision.
 Said his time had come
 to shake this old lagoon.

So the cap'n of thieves he went to the moon.
He got there by the jam of his blazin' fiddle
and said someday he'd return
with revelation and inspired blueprints
to gather his brotherly crew.

GUPPY He promised to raise the old Empress outa the mud...

DUKE And spin a course for the starry blue!

TOGETHER (*Rapturously*) AAAHHHH!

Pause. Duke looks askance at Guppy.

DUKE Psst. Hey, Guppy, speak up. It's yer turn, ain't it?

GUPPY Aw, go on without me, Duke. I gotta bone in my guffer.

DUKE Like hell you do! You forgot the words again!

GUPPY Well, just between you and me and the slapped-ass of the settin' sun, I'll remember again when I see Clancy fiddle back down with a sackful of universal secrets. In person! I'm get tired of those plain old words. Fifteen years of hanging on tender hooks and I ain't the man I used to be.

WORM Have hope, old boy. Can't be long now.

GUPPY Hope schmoke! Look at me! My hands are both thumbs, my fast tail is frozen-like, and my bum's gettin' so baggy I can barely crawl outa bed and go to work in the morning. I ain't pilched a pocket in three weeks. Have you?

DUKE I've had the flu.

WORM I sprained my ankle.

GUPPY Damn! See what I mean? We're all gettin' crotchety waitin' fer Clancy. Countin' Peck Woodstick and young Rooster we're the last tramps in the whole lagoon. The rest've all died off. Charlie, Tinker, Palimino, Turdface—they all took those crummy words to their muddy graves.

DUKE May they rest in peace.

WORM Ditto.

GUPPY And tomorry it might be me! Why just yesterday I strolled straight into Ernie's Snake Pit. Now I ain't never done that before. I been pickin' coily creatures outa my wardrobe ever since. I can't hang on forever, Duke. I gotta case of creepin' senility and it scares the hell outa me.

WORM Don't let the bandit be burned outa yer heart, Guppy. Clancy promised transcendence and we're gonna get transcendence.

GUPPY Worm, stuff it! We gotta crisis to consider! I'll say it straight out—There's sumpin' smelly like dead fish when it comes to Peck's prophecy about Clancy's homecomin'.

DUKE Yer rockin' the streamboat, Guppy.

GUPPY It needs rockin', you old fool! It's needed rockin' fer a decade!

WORM But Peck saw Clancy fiddle up and he wuz his best buddy in the whole lagoon.

GUPPY So sez Peck. He wuz the on'y one who saw, tidy.

WORM Rooster believes! The red-haired bandit is got lotsa hope. Why don't you go fishin' together and get refueled?

GUPPY Aw, he's Peck apprentice. He'd do anything that moldy ol' crowbait told him to, ring in the nose-like. I don't trust neither one of 'em any more.

DUKE Guppy—

GUPPY And I'm sick in the gills fer layin' my good plunder 'n booty in the mud of the Empress, prophecy or no prophecy. I mean, when wuz the last time you saw Peck swipe for hisself? Huh?

DUKE Well ... now that yuh mention it I ... I ... Iyiyi.

GUPPY Duke, listen to me, buddy. I know it hurts to think, but damnit we're nearly dead and we got nuthin' but promises to show fer it. Right?

Pause.

DUKE Clancy wuzza finger man. The best in the business. Taught me everything I know about the art of river robbery. On the other hand I ain't made a clean swipe in ages. On'y from the slow and very stupid.

WORM I'm gettin' scared! If we don't transcend soon we're gonna be all washed up fer sackin' the universe!

DUKE Don't crack up, Worm. Okay, Guppy. What're yuh sayin'? Spit it out.

GUPPY I say now's the time we put the screws of our discontent to Peck Woodstick. And if he don't communicate our crisis to Clancy in the sky I'm gonna take his phony prophesy and stick it where the moon don't shine. Then we'll see about whose bony hands is fer grippin' what wheel.

DUKE Nobuddy's on the make here, Guppy. This is gotta be a team effort or not at all.

GUPPY I on'y want some answers to one damn question: What the hell is up? Plain and simple. No make.

DUKE No mutiny.

GUPPY We'll see.

WORM I think we should all go home and ferget about it.

GUPPY You would.

WORM Oh be quiet.

DUKE Both be quiet. Here comes Peck.

WORM Oh no.

DUKE Let me do the talkin', Guppy. You always make him mad.

GUPPY Okay, but don't fag out on me, some guts.

Peck Woodstick comes out of the steering station on the hurricane deck above. He is eating from a can of sardines with his fingers and whistling a little tune. He looks down at the tramps out of the corner of his eye, then emits a huge yawn. Guppy gives Duke a nudge.

DUKE Hi, Peck!

PECK OH! Yuh scared me. I wuz havin' a little nap. Ain't half awake yet.

DUKE Sorry, Peck. We wuz tryin' to whisper.

PECK Naw, that's okay. Y'coulda snuck up on me with a tractor. Where's the moon?

DUKE High as a kite!

WORM Bright as a honeyed apple!

PECK Look! There goes Clancy Dougal dancin' two-step through a crate!

TRAMPS WHERE?

PECK ...Yuh missed'im. *(Laughs)*

Dontcha just love little customs. (He comes down to the deck)

Hey! I got an idea! If it don't rain tonight whaddya say we go on a little picnic? Eh, Worm? Fry up a chicken, get summa Guppy's cocktail, go uppity Chuck's Point and watch the barges go by. Whaddya say, gang?

WORM Sounds good to me, Peck. I'll fry up the chicken.

PECK Like on'y you can do it, girl. Whaddya say, Duke? We could roll out the old checkerboard and play best outa seven fer matchsticks. Eh? Eh? *(Laughs)* Whatta shark!

Guppy gives Duke another shove.

DUKE Uuuh, Peck...?

PECK Uuuh, what? Duke, what? What? Whenever you open your move with "Uuuh" I know it's a biggy. What?

DUKE Well ... we wuz just wonderin' ... the three of us here ... like sooo what's up with the prophecy these days? That is I mean, if we ain't doin' sumpin' to bring it to the boiling point we'd just as soon be doin' it as not be doin' it. (*Laughs weakly*)
If yuh get what I mean?

PECK Vague.

GUPPY Then maybe I could sharpen it up some, mind?

PECK Guppy! Good idea. You be the one. I'd like that. Truly.

GUPPY My pleasure.

So Guppy walks up to the Empress and yanks a rotting board off the portside. Then he raises it above his head and brings it down hard on Peck's foot up on the point of the prow. Peck doesn't even flinch. He scratches his head.

GUPPY Sharp enough?

PECK Medium.

GUPPY No pain, right?

PECK Look, Guppy, ev'ry dog knows I'm half-dead from the knee down on this leg. So what's yer point?

GUPPY The point is that you ain't the on'y one anymore who's draggin' chunksa body around like they wuz spare parts or sumpin'. And the bigger the chunks the slower yuh get. It's a simple law of nature, Peck. Hell, I could wrap this board around Duke's head and probably get the same reaction.

DUKE Yer the one with snakes in yer closet not me.

Worm laughs.

GUPPY And Worm's a giggly birdbrain. It all fits what I'm sayin'.

PECK Well somewhere's I already fell outa the boat. I mean, what's all this petty pitter patter got to do with Clancy's prophecy which is time-honored, respected, most noble, classified, bigger than a bread basket, kinda creepy, and otherwise beyond the normal human grip?

GUPPY It's the "grip" part. And biggy is this—When is Clancy comin' home to gather his brotherly crew? It's been fifteen years, seven hundred and ninety-odd full moons, and who knows how many words of hope ... When?

PECK Duke?

DUKE Yeah, Peck, I hate to admit but I've been countin' the days more than usual too.

PECK Worm?

WORM I just wanna hear Clancy's sweet fiddle again, that's all.

PECK Well, gang ... the answer is this ... I dunno! Why ask me? I'm just a tramp like youse.

DUKE But you got mental telepitty with Clancy in the cosmos. Right?

WORM You always sez so.

PECK A direct line of communication I sez, sure, but it takes awful heavy contemplation fer a man with a bad ticker.

DUKE Well if you ain't up to it nobuddy is.

PECK True. But, gee whiz, it takes a full moon to copy the blueprints under.

GUPPY It's a full moon tonight, ain't it?

PECK (*Looks up*)
Pretty close, I s'poze. But, hey, what about the lagoon marchin' band? We gotta conjure up a musical highway fer Clancy to fiddle down on, and like yuh said - more'n half the orchestra is dead. Charlie, Palimino...

GUPPY I thought you wuz nappin'.

PECK Eh?

DUKE We can do it! We'll just hafta toot twice as hard, that's all.

WORM I'll toot! Just gimme the chance!

GUPPY Atta go, Worm.

DUKE C'mon, Peck! Let's make prophesy come to pass!

TRAMPS YEAH!

Pause.

PECK Gee, brothers. I dunno. Man-oh-man.

He walks away from them, muttering and shaking his head. He looks up at the moon and scratches his beard with both hands vigorously. Then a light comes to his eyes. He raises his brows and smiles a little. He turns back around to them.

PECK ...Alrighty. I'll do it.

The Tramps cheer and adlib encouragements.

PECK Hold on! Hold on!

They quiet down.

I'm gonna need plen'y of time fer meditation and a whole lotta plunder'n booty. Fer Clancy. So go to your various homes and wait for my word. I'll go to the cave-in-rock and put my bad ticker to work. If I connect with Clancy on the air waves I'll letchya know. Now go! Disperse!

The Tramps cheer. Peck moves away from them and stands gazing at the moon.

WORM Holy crow! I feel like jumpin'!

DUKE I'm goin' fer a snooze. I wanna be clear-headed and flules fer the marchin' band. Gotta get shipshape fer transcendence!

GUPPY If and when.

WORM Me, too! I gotta go home and feed my skinny chickens!

GUPPY Them scrawny birds is stayin' back, Worm. Chickens don't transcend.

WORM Will if I want!

GUPPY Oh yeah?

WORM Yeah!

DUKE Stop fightin', you two! Let's go home and leave Peck with a little peace. And who knows what midnight will release. C'mon!

Duke heads off into the bramble. Worm follows excitedly. Guppy lags behind. He stops. Turns.

GUPPY Hey, Peck?

PECK Hey, what?

GUPPY There's no such thing as a free lunch. *(Starts to go.)*

PECK Hey, Guppy?

GUPPY What?

PECK If yuh open up a can of worms, the on'y way to get'em all back in is to use a bigger can.

Guppy grins slyly. Peck grins back. Then Guppy disappears into the bramble. Peck turns to the audience.

PECK Oh me shattered soul. It looks like a storm is gonna fall down boom on my lagoon. Now there's a fright full of thought. Them tramps is gettin' the drift of their predicament. Ah me, now what? Gotta think fast-like, Peck Woodstick. Gotta set me royal beans to work again. I ain't called Cap'n fer nuthin'!

He squeezes a look at the moon.

Damn you, Clancy Dougal! How long y'gonna haunt me bloodstream, yuh fiddlin' jerk? How many more legends I gotta spin to keep them old tramps offa me bony neck? Holy, holy, so long ago I almost forget ... I wore the pants in this lagoon. I had me castle in the mud. Me legs always got me from the cops. I took no bunk and I ate no crud from nobuddy. Then Clancy came to town. Wearin' that garter on his sleeve. He laughed at me leg and swiped me crew but nobuddy's seen'im since! ...Yer thinkin' I'm dupery, dontcha? Well, horsepucky! Bumps on the log of life that's what you are! I'M THE CAP'N!—And I intend to pretend

to stay that way... Oh, I've got me faithful followin' in the likes of me apprentice of swipe. He's got red hair like a shootin' star, flyin' feet like the wind, sticky fingers like atomic glue, and a boss in the likes of me. He's good in the crunch. Get the point?

Starts moving around and rubbing his hands together.

I ain't no slouch tramp. They'll spinnin' legends around me before I'm dead. Oh I got business and items of mischief tonight. I gotta plan up me hairy-arm sleeve. I got plunder and thunder bangin' in me skull. Gonna make masquerade into prophesy! You just wait and see. Ha ha. Ho ho. Hee hee.

Peck hobbles off into the bramble. A moment. Suddenly a sack of something is thrown over the bramble on the opposite side of the stage and then Rooster comes barrel-assing into view like a Hollywood stuntman. He peeks back through the bramble and laughs.

ROOSTER Stupid tourists.

Then, satisfied with his safety, he jumps onto the deck of the Empress. He drops his sack down and looks around.

ROOSTER Peck? Hey, Peck, are you here?

He grins to himself, then he climbs up the ladder to the hurricane deck. He disappears into the steering station and reappears with an old striped deck chair, which he unfolds and sits in. He sighs with gratification and begins to whistle Peck's tune from before. Now we hear a rustling in the bramble in the direction of Peck's exit. Rooster gasps and begins to refold the chair, catching his finger in it, just as Becky makes her appearance. She is wearing a dress and has a traveling bag over her shoulder. She tiptoes gingerly through the mud. She sees the Empress and stops in her tracks. Rooster hides.

BECKY Wow!

She takes a diary from her bag and begins to write in it.

"Dear Mr. Twain: Today I came upon an old river boat of ... indeterminate age and dimensions. It was dirty ... smelly ... lopsided ... and absolutely defied any purposes whatsoever. Some kind of swamp animal had defecated on the deck. There were

cobwebs strewn all over the hogging. It was a sore sight for pretty eyes and indeed a minor curiosity but I decided to board it anyway.”

She moves closer. Stops.

“I hesitated. There were spiders in the cobwebs and the swamp animal stuff looked fresh. I concluded it was a dumb idea.”

She puts her diary back into her bag and begins to walk away. Rooster comes quietly out of hiding and leaps toward her.

ROOSTER Look out!

She screams and trips over into the mud. Rooster laughs hard.

ROOSTER What’s the matter, girl? Did I scare yuh?

BECKY No! Who are you?

She gets to her feet.

ROOSTER Nobuddy. Who’re you?

BECKY None of your business. Oh! Look at my dress!

ROOSTER Pretty colour. Except for the mud.

Laughs.

BECKY Ha ha.

ROOSTER What’s that smell on you?

BECKY Perfume!

ROOSTER Are you lost?

BECKY Definitely not!

ROOSTER Don’t worry, it on’y shows a little. Ev’rybuddy gets lost around here. I’ve been lost for months. What’s in the bag?

BECKY Just some—none of your business!

ROOSTER Havin' a picnic? Out for a stroll in the summer air maybe?

BECKY I don't stroll. I'm ... passing by.

ROOSTER Must be nice. I'm goin' around in circles myself. What's that around your neck?

BECKY What does it look like?

ROOSTER A chain with a rock on it.

He reaches out to touch it. She gasps and covers it with her hand.

BECKY Do you mind?

ROOSTER Mind what?

BECKY I want to be alone.

ROOSTER I was here first.

BECKY Shoo!

ROOSTER I'll flip you for it.

BECKY No!

ROOSTER Just as well, I don't have a nickel. Hey! Got any spare change for the likes of me? I'm a traveller and a tired soul who din't have no supper for three days back.

BECKY I'm a traveller myself and I don't have much money to begin with.

ROOSTER Maybe just a crust of raisin bread left over from your picnic.

BECKY I only had one sandwich and I already ate it.

ROOSTER How about a toothpick to keep my mouth busy?

BECKY Good idea.

Now we hear the low, mellow sound of a distant river boat.

ROOSTER That's the *W.B. Dance* goin' to the sea.

BECKY If you run you can still make it.

ROOSTER So! You're a traveller, huh? Havin' a little holiday away from the humdrum. Well, the swump is a fine choice. You got style. Maybe you'd like to reach into my sack. What you pull is what you get. Twenny-five bucks. Take a chance. Why not? Souvenir! Like I said, twenny bucks.

He gestures to his sack on the deck.

BECKY Don't you have any scruples?

ROOSTER Maybe. Reach in and find out. What you pull is yours. But do it quick or you might get bit. There's a serpent inside. Yeah, really! He got hold of my leg back there in the bramble and wouldn't let go so I clobbers him over the head and there he lays. I'll sell'im to yuh for fifteen bucks.

BECKY You're full of bunkum.

ROOSTER I like your shoes.

BECKY Oh, thanks.

ROOSTER Ten bucks and he's yours. Take'im home before he comes to. Stick'im under an old wash tub and sit on it.

BECKY Are you crazy?

ROOSTER Never been saner. And when he starts screamin' to get out yuh whupple on toppy the tub with a wooden spoon or a soup bone until he starts to bawl. Then yuh takes a handful of pepper and yuh throws it quicklylike under the tub. He'll start wheezin and sneezin' and you'll hafta get your ugly fat cousin to sit on it with yuh. After he's gone and sneezed all the snort outa hisself yuh lifts up the tub and yuh poke his eyes out with a sharp fork. All that good 'n done he'll make the best housepet for a classy girl you've ever seen. Five bucks.

BECKY We already have a dog.

ROOSTER Three bucks.

BECKY You are crazy.

ROOSTER Oh yeah? Watch this, pretty miss.

He steps on the sack. A loud screech emits. Becky jumps back.

He's still a little groggy I reckon. I whuppled'im real good. Take that!

He steps again—Another screech.

BECKY My goodness.

ROOSTER Two bucks? It's a bargain.

BECKY You're trying to trick me.

ROOSTER Have a peek inside if yuh don't believe me. Grab'im by the scruff of the neck and pull him out. Kick'im once in the ribs and he'll sit up like a cocker spaniel. Go ahead.

BECKY No.

ROOSTER Chicken.

BECKY I am not.

ROOSTER Prove it.

Pause. She considers the sack. Then bends over it cautiously. Rooster delicately removes her necklace and slips it into his pocket like honey. The river boat calls again. Becky draws back from the sack.

BECKY I'm not going to fall for it.

ROOSTER It's your loss.

BECKY I think I'll catch that river boat.

ROOSTER Ten minute call. Y'better run.

She nudges the sack with her tiny foot.

BECKY Hogwash.

Then runs off into the bramble the way she came.

ROOSTER *(Waving)* So long!—sucker. *(He laughs and playfully kicks the sack)*

Take that, yuh mean little bugger. (Laughs again, then takes the necklace out of his pocket, examines it, smells it, bites on it, and drops it in his sack.)

PECK'S VOICE *(In the distance)* Rooosterrr! Rooosterrr!

Rooster remembers the deck chair unfolded above.

ROOSTER Ho-jeez! *(He scampers across the deck and up the ladder.)*

PECK'S VOICE *(Getting closer)* Rooosterrr!

Rooster quickly folds up the chair, slamming his finger in it...

ROOSTER Ow!

... and puts it back in the steering station just as Peck hobbles excitedly into view. Rooster clamours down the ladder, sits on the bottom rung, and begins whistling nonchalantly.

PECK Rooster!

ROOSTER Over here. Peck.

PECK Oh Rooster! *(Boards the Empress.)*

ROOSTER What's the matter? You look awful.

PECK I just had awful news land on me skull!

ROOSTER What news?

PECK Where's the moon?

ROOSTER High as kite.

PECK Bright as a honeyed apple! Look! There goes Clancy Dougal dancin' two-step through a crater!

ROOSTER Where?!

PECK Yuh missed'im.

ROOSTER Damn!

PECK Oh-oh-oh, Rooster! I've just come from heavy contemplation
at the cave-in-rock.

ROOSTER What for?

PECK Guess.

ROOSTER Tell me.

PECK Hold onta yer underwear, me grand loyal swipe— (*Takes a deep breath
and lets it out*) —I gained telepitty with the Starry Bandit.

ROOSTER You're lyin'.

PECK Like drinkin' moonlight through a straw.

ROOSTER No!

PECK He poked his hot finger inta me beans and twirled them around.
I got the shakes in ev'ry bone in me body. Ev'ry bitta marrow
wuz grindin' and cracklin' from me head to me toes. Tonight's
the night!

ROOSTER (*Struck*) ... Yuh mean...?

PECK CLANCY'S COMIN' HOME!

*Rooster freezes, his mouth agape. Peck looks at him, then boots him in the
bum. Rooster blinks.*

ROOSTER Ho-jeez.

PECK Rightly so. This is it.

ROOSTER I think I'm gonna crack up.

PECK Don't crack up. Whatever yuh do don't crack up. Y'gotta be
in one hopeful piece fer the homecomin' party.

ROOSTER Ho-jeez.

PECK Whatsa matter?

ROOSTER I can't think straight.

PECK Yes yuh can.

ROOSTER No I can't. It's all mixed up.

PECK No it ain't.

He boots Rooster again—off the deck and into the mud.

ROOSTER Whaddya do that for?

PECK Fer strength and hope, yuh stupid nitwit.

ROOSTER What if Clancy don't choose me for his crew? What if I ain't good enuff for the blast-off?

PECK Horsepucky!

He beans Rooster with his stick.

ROOSTER Ow.

PECK I taught yuh ev'rything yuh need to know about the art of river robbery. Din't I? Don't lose yer grip, me loyal swipe, or Clancy might get mad.

ROOSTER Ho-jeez.

PECK Rightly so.

ROOSTER Tell me again.

PECK Tell yuh what?

ROOSTER All about hope.

PECK Yuh don't deserve it.

ROOSTER Yes I do!

PECK Horsepucky.

ROOSTER TELL ME!

PECK (*Quickly by rote*) “Hope is feelin’ and feelin’ is believin’ and believin’s gonna bring Clancy outa the cosmos with moonbeams on the brim of his hat and all the secrets of the universe in his sack.”

ROOSTER Wow.

PECK So sez I.

ROOSTER Tell me how Clancy fiddled to the moon.

PECK Nope.

ROOSTER How come?

PECK It’s too beautiful fer words.

ROOSTER Aw, c’mon, you crud! I gotta have that sparkle in my beans for the homecomin’ party! ... Please?

PECK Who am I?

ROOSTER You’re the cap’n of thieves, Peck.

PECK Who’re you?

ROOSTER Your apprentice of swipec through ’n through.

PECK Yer the best little bandit this river has ever seen.

ROOSTER Right.

PECK Since me.

ROOSTER Right.

PECK Alright.

ROOSTER Whew!

Peck sits on the railing.

PECK But don't breathe a word to no strangers.
 Just between you and me.
 That wuzza night of wonder.
 A night of glory-be.

Peck taps the deck at his feet. Rooster sits there joyfully.

PECK Well...

 Clancy Dougal wuzza tramp-a-travellin',
 he come to this here swamp.

 He fiddled and danced and told such stories,
 in yer guff he put a lump.

ROOSTER Get to the good part.

PECK Hold yer horses! ... Where wuz I?

ROOSTER Lump.

PECK Lump?

ROOSTER Lump!

PECK Right...

 No sooner had Clancy parked his bum
 on the throne of his lagoon,
 then all of a suddly morn he woke,
 said, "I'm goin' to the moon!"

ROOSTER Wow.

PECK "I got ants in my pants
 and cobwebs in my hair,
 I'm gonna pick up me fiddle
 and march outa here!
 I'm gonna bathe in the moonlight
 and dunk my head in the Milky Way.
 I'm gonna trail on the tail
 of a star," said he.

ROOSTER He can do all that???

PECK Rightly so and a whole lot more.
He said, “When I come home
some full-moon night,
I’m gonna gather my brotherly crew.
I’m gonna lift this boat outa the mud
and spin a course for the starry blue!”

ROOSTER Aaahhh!

PECK Stars in the paddle wheel.

ROOSTER Just think.

PECK The ring of Venus blowin’ through yer beard.

ROOSTER I can’t stand it!

PECK Stealin’ quasars and stuffin’ cosmos in yer sack.

ROOSTER Whuppee! I’m goin’ to and I ain’t comin’ back!

PECK So Clancy and me went straight into town
to find a launchin’ pad.

ROOSTER On’y you!

PECK Nobuddy else.

ROOSTER Cuz you wuz the buddy he never had!

PECK Hit it!

Rooster begins pounding a drum beat on the deck.

PECK So at the stroke of midnight, Clancy Dougal clumb to the top
of the tallest buildin’ we could find. Yup! Straight up the
side of’er! He chewed out hunks of brick ‘n boulder to make
foot-holds fer his feet as he went. He carried his fiddle in
his teeth and his bow under one ear. He clumb to the tip of
the flagpole and stuck his chest at the moon. Then he started
to play. His fiddle blazed in the moonlight and the clouds
assembled. They crawled outa their bunks in the sky and started
to march. Clancy fiddled. He had no fingers now. Just one eye
and a bright red garter. The wind she started to blow. Then all

of a suddy a golden bolt of moonlight come blisterin' outa the sky and struck ol' Clancy on the square of his head!

Rooster stops the beat.

... And he wuz gone.

ROOSTER Gone.

PECK Evaporated into thin air.

ROOSTER Clancy Dougal wuzza stargazer.

PECK The noblest wretch you could ever meet.

ROOSTER Who wuz last seen chewin' on the corner of the moon—

TOGETHER With both crooked teeth.

Silence. Rooster gazes upwards with his mouth open, then...

ROOSTER Look! There goes Clancy dancin' two-step through a crater!

Peck looks up. Then looks at Rooster.

PECK Right. Now. Lemme see whatcha brung in yer sack.

ROOSTER What?

PECK Yer sack!

ROOSTER Oh! Sure, boss, yeah!

Rooster scurries to get his sack. Peck climbs up the ladder and disappears into the steering station. Rooster climbs the ladder. Peck reappears with his deck chair, unfolds it on the hurricane deck, and sits. Then he stands. Looks down at the chair suspiciously. Re-sits. Rooster quickly opens his sack.

ROOSTER Have a look.

PECK Bring it out.

Rooster takes out a small globe and a Magic Cube and juggles them a few times.

ROOSTER Pretty good, huh?

PECK Dazzlin'. What else y'got?
He pulls out a pair of lady's nylons and holds them up proudly.

PECK How the hell didya manage that?

ROOSTER Oh I've got the quickest two hands you've ever seen.

PECK How old are you, Rooster?

ROOSTER Fifteen I think. Why?

PECK One of these we're gonna hafta have a long talk.

ROOSTER About what?

PECK About the guiles and willies of women. What else y'got?
He pulls out Becky's necklace and shrugs.

ROOSTER A little do-dad. Ain't much.

PECK Lemme look closer. Hmm. Now that's a rarity. Give to me, boy.
It's a keeper.

ROOSTER No, it's mine. I made the swipe.

PECK Who's the boss you or me?

ROOSTER You are but—
Peck boots him in the bum. The necklace springs loose. Peck catches it.

PECK Thanks. What else?

ROOSTER Nuthin'.

PECK What's in the bottom there?

ROOSTER It's mine.

PECK Lemme see!

Rooster frowns and pulls out an old concertina. He produces the “serpent” noise and grins.

PECK What sort of item is that?

ROOSTER It’s a squeaky-link accordian that’s what.

PECK Maybe Worm’ll give us a sack of chickens fer it.

ROOSTER No! It’s a keeper! For me! I mean, we gotta resemble the old lagoon marchin’ band, don’t we? We gotta conjure up a musical highway for Clancy to fiddle down on. Remember?

PECK ’Course I remember, yuh nitwit!

ROOSTER Well, Clancy’s got his blazin’ fiddle, you got your rusty-dusty bugle, and I ain’t got nuthin’.

PECK The band wuz long before yer time, Rooster.

ROOSTER So what? All I need is practice. Please?

PECK Yer serious, eh?

Rooster screws up his face seriously.

Alright. You may keep it.

ROOSTER Whuppee!

PECK —on one condition if.

ROOSTER If what?

PECK Y’promise me sumpin’.

ROOSTER What?

PECK That you won’t turn yer back on me no matter what. I mean, don’t trust nobuddy else, boy. Tonight is wrought fer treason.

ROOSTER Aw, Peck, don’t worry. You’re the cap’n!

PECK Swear it!

ROOSTER Shit.

PECK Alright.

There is a low rumbling of thunder in the sky.

It looks like a storm is gonna fall down boom on my lagoon. Better I be driftin' out in the night-wash to deliver the invitations to Clancy's homecomin' party. Tuck this stuff in the boiler.

ROOSTER Can I come with yuh?

PECK No. I'll be movin' too fast. You'll never keep up.

Peck climbs down the ladder. Rooster follows him with his sack and accordion.

ROOSTER Hey, Peck?

PECK Hey what now?

ROOSTER What's it gonna be like?

PECK What's it what gonna be like?

ROOSTER When the Empress rises outa the mud and Clancy makes a course for the starry blue. How're we gonna breathe? How're we gonna find food outer in space? What kinds of things we gonna see?

PECK Use yer imagination.

ROOSTER Gimme some fer example.

PECK Lookee, boy, stop worryin' about details. Clancy's got it all figured out in his own way. He's got revelation and inspired blueprints. Right? So with Clancy in the cabin and yers truthfully at the wheel, we'll navigate the course of things most people just dream about. We'll up and away to the bedazzlin' blue hole of the heavens!

ROOSTER Wow.

They gaze at the moon together.

PECK Clancyyy? Is that yooou?

ROOSTER Think he can hear yuh?

PECK Telepitty maybe. Who knows?

Rooster is transfixed by the moon. Peck hobbles to the edge of the bramble. There is another low rumble in the sky.

PECK Look out, storm. Peck Woodstick is comin'. I'm off in the wrinkly-dinkly night with a plan up me hairy-arm sleeve. I'm crippled as sin, but I'm the cap'n of thieves!

He disappears through the bramble.

ROOSTER ... Hey, Peck, what if—?

He looks around for Peck. Then he smiles and quickly runs and stuffs his sack of booty in the boiler under the hurricane deck. He takes the concertina in his hands and sits on the prow. He begins to practice, badly, but with growing enthusiasm.

Now, through the bramble, comes Guppy, crawling on his belly toward the Empress. In his hand he holds a whiskey bottle full of bronze liquid with a twisted rag dangling out of the neck. He crawls to the portside and stuffs the bottle into the gap where earlier he tore off the board. The bottle rests inside the shell of the boat with an inch of rag poking out. Guppy then begins crawling back toward the bramble. There is a low rumble in the sky. Rooster stops playing and looks up.

Is that yooou?

Guppy freezes face down in the mud.

ROOSTER Lookee here. Pearl keys. No more crawlin' through cracks, leapin' outa trees or duckin' under mud for me. Just see me swingin' through the stars tootin' this little baby.

Another rumble above.

Clancyyy?



*Rooster (Jim Farley) plays the concertina in Gordon Pengilly's *Swipe* (produced at Walterdale as *The Apprentice of Swipe*), May 1981. Photo: C.W. Hill Photography for Walterdale Theatre Associates.*

ROOSTER Lookout!

Rooster begins playing again. And Guppy crawls into the bramble and disappears. Now, through the bramble in another place, comes Becky again, looking quite disheveled and perturbed. She sees Rooster playing and decides with a vengeance to sneak up on him. But Rooster catches a whiff of her perfume and smiles to himself. As she comes up behind him—

ROOSTER Did I scare yuh?

Becky screams and falls over in the mud. Rooster turns around laughing.

BECKY No!

ROOSTER I thought you wuz catchin' the *W.B. Dance*.

BECKY So did I.

ROOSTER What happened?

BECKY Help me up.

She holds out her hand. Rooster smiles, takes her arm, pulls her up and steals her bracelet all in one motion.

BECKY Thank you.

ROOSTER My pleasure.

BECKY I was halfway to the dock when I realized I'd lost my necklace. I came back to look for it.

ROOSTER Really, eh?

BECKY Don't just stand there! Help me!

ROOSTER Sure.

They both look around in the mud.

BECKY My luck is lousy today.

ROOSTER So is mine. My serpent got loose. Sack sprung a leak. Must be around here somewheres. If yuh happen to turn the bugger up lemme know. It's easy to spot. Looks like a big snake with leathery wings. It's a variety both in the water and out. Has deadly green powder on the tip of its tail and makes a whole other sound not unlikely to this—

Rooster lets out a loud, weird yelp. Becky jumps back.

ROOSTER Pretty good, huh?

BECKY It's absolutely obnoxious!

ROOSTER I've been practicin'. Cuz I plan to bait'im. And if I had one square meal under my belt I'd have just enuff strength to strangle the bounder and be done with it. But as you see I'm skinny as a rake from the weary road. Hey! Got any spare change—ten dollars or so that I could feed myself on and maybe buy a knife?

BECKY No!

Becky starts to cry. Rooster pulls back and stares.

ROOSTER What's the matter?

BECKY I'm crying!

ROOSTER How come?

BECKY Because!

ROOSTER You ain't even hurt.

BECKY You don't have to bleed to cry, you maniac.

ROOSTER Well if yuh ain't hurt yuh must be sumpin'.

BECKY I'm FRUSTRATED!

ROOSTER What's that?

BECKY I'm fifteen going on sixteen and I can't get past the lagoon!

ROOSTER Follow the river.

BECKY You don't understand me!

ROOSTER Well, you ain't helpin' a whole lot, girl.

BECKY My name's Becky!

ROOSTER Are the cops after you?

BECKY What makes you say that?

ROOSTER You gotta way of lookin' over your shoulder without turnin' your head.

BECKY Do I?

ROOSTER Are you on the run?

BECKY (*Sighs—nods*) I ran away from my stepfather this morning.

ROOSTER How come?

BECKY Because he's an old, fat, retired magistrate with grey hairs poking out of his ears.

ROOSTER Does he kick yuh around the yard?

BECKY No, but sometimes he locks me up in the library and makes me read.

ROOSTER You're kidding.

BECKY Every morning he crawls out of bed and calls for his stupid warm milk and eggs. "Come here, Rebecca, and help me find my blasted socks!" Ooo!

ROOSTER Dirty old bugger.

BECKY Oh he'll be going barefoot for the rest of his days.

ROOSTER If you get your way.

BECKY (*Stamps her foot*) I will!

ROOSTER (*Laughs.*)

BECKY Are you making fun of me?

ROOSTER Well, it don't sound that bad.

BECKY Plato's *Republic* behind a locked door is a fate worse than death. I hate books! I want to be a writer!

ROOSTER I can't even read.

BECKY Not at all?

ROOSTER Not a word.

BECKY Didn't you learn in school?

ROOSTER Never.

BECKY Never???

ROOSTER Nope.

BECKY Are you a vagabond?

ROOSTER Probably not. I'm skin and bones and weak with hunger but I'm as happy as a snake in the grass.

BECKY Amazing.

ROOSTER Yup, that's me.

Becky whips open her bag and takes out her diary.

BECKY What's your name?

ROOSTER What's that book for?

BECKY It's a journal of my adventures. I'm dedicating the whole summer to Mark Twain.

ROOSTER Who's he?

BECKY He's the freewheeler who lies inside of Plato when my stepfather isn't looking.

She giggles; Rooster cocks his head at her.

BECKY Never mind. Tell me your name.

ROOSTER It's Rooster.

BECKY Very good. Why? *(Begins writing.)*

ROOSTER Cuz of my red hair so sez Peck.

BECKY Who's he?

ROOSTER Peck Woodstick that's who. He found me in a basket in the mud after a river boat sunk. Ev'rybuddy else wuz killed I wuz just a baby who floated into shore. Peck scooped me up, stuck a bone in my mouth, and made me his apprentice of swipe.

BECKY *(Writing furiously)* What's that?

ROOSTER That's what I do. Write it down.

BECKY I need more detail.

ROOSTER Slink. Snatch. Pilch.

BECKY Steal???

ROOSTER Yup! He taught me ev'rything I know about the art of river robbery. I'm topnotch for my age. Ask anybuddy. Sackin' paddle wheelers is my special.

BECKY I don't believe you.

ROOSTER I've got the quickest two hands you've ever seen!

BECKY That's disgusting!

She turns her back haughtily. Rooster snatches the ribbon from her hair.

... How do you do it?

ROOSTER Lots of ways! Sometimes I sneak aboard at night and cheat the gamblers at poker.

BECKY Really?

ROOSTER Really sure! Other times I pretend to be a traveller marooned on the riverbank. Some stupid tourist always pulls me aboard and feeds me. Then I wander around and pick pockets. (*Laughs.*)

BECKY No scruples.

ROOSTER Not that I know of.

She bends over her diary. Rooster swipes her earring.

BECKY What else?

ROOSTER On good days I pick the calking from the seams of the boat so's it sinks downriver where Peck is waitin'—he can't steal for hisself no more, gotta bum leg—and stuff just floats into shore. Peck picks it up and hobbles into the bramble whuls ev'rybuddy is screamin' for their lives. Nice timin', eh?

BECKY But what happens to you?

ROOSTER Oh, I gotta swim like hell from the alligators!

BECKY Now you're exaggerating!

ROOSTER I got bit once. Wanna see?

BECKY Okay!—no. I'm a lady ... Is it a big bite?

Rooster smiles and lifts up his tattered shirt revealing a scar. A long look from her.

BECKY Can I touch it?

ROOSTER If yuh want to.

She moves her fingertip along the length of his scar delicately. Her diary falls from her lap. They look at each other. There's a low rumble in the sky. They turn away from each other rather perplexed. Rooster quickly tucks his shirt in.

ROOSTER There's a storm comin'.

BECKY (*Dreamily*) Ah! Yes. There's a mist on the lagoon, chum. It's rolling in like folds of lavender waves. (*She quickly writes that down.*)

ROOSTER Yuh better be lookin' for shelter, girl. You'll get blowed hither-de-pither all over the bramble. I mean, yuh just can't take the chance of gettin' caught without a coop around here.

BECKY "Chance is the providence of adventurers." Napoleon said that.

ROOSTER He probably had a roof over his head.

BECKY And so do I.

ROOSTER Where at?

BECKY Here.

ROOSTER Oh. —WHAT?

BECKY I'll wait out the tempest in the bosom of this majestic Queen of the swamp. Wow! (*She writes that down.*)

ROOSTER No! You can't!

BECKY Why not?

ROOSTER Cuz—you ain't been invited!

BECKY Nonsense.

ROOSTER It's a private party tonight!

BECKY What're you babbling about? It's a free lagoon.

ROOSTER No it ain't!

We hear the sound of someone coming through the bramble who clatters and tinkles as he walks.

BECKY Hush! What's that sound? ... Someone's coming!

ROOSTER If it's Peck and the tramps yuh better duck your butt, girl, cuz tonight is rotten with treason!

BECKY Good! The more the merrier! Open the flood gates!

ROOSTER Ho-jeez.

Enter, through the bramble, an old blind tinkerman, singing. Over his back and around his shoulders are ropes bearing cups and pans, kettles and spoons, socks and shoes, and an assortment of other things that hang okay but probably don't work worth a damn. He wears dark sunglasses and an old raincoat. Becky takes one look at him and dives behind a barrel. Rooster has already hidden behind the boiler.

TINKER My body's a bag,
My head is a bone,
I'm blind as a bat
and I've got no home.
But mamma,
Ooooh, mamma,
I got some pretty things to sell.

He boards the Empress tapping his cane. And stops,

There's somebody here. I smell dirty feet. I smell perfume.

Y'wanna sweep your floor? I sell you a broom.

Speak up. I won't bite. I don't have any teeth.

He laughs. Rooster and Becky peer out from their hiding places. They look at each other. Rooster puts his finger to his lips. She glares back at him. Then stands—

BECKY Who are you?

TINKER Who're you, little miss?

BECKY I asked first. What's your name?

TINKER It's Tinker in the north and Kettles in the south.

BECKY Where do you come from?

TINKER I come and I go. Been following this river for ninety-five years. I've got no sight but I do have bearing.

BECKY Are you really blind?

TINKER Are you a brunette?

BECKY (*Lying*) No I'm blond.

TINKER Then I must be blind.

BECKY Oh.

Rooster stifles a laugh. She glares at him.

TINKER What's your line of business?

BECKY I'm a writer.

TINKER How romantic.

BECKY It's very rewarding. Today I'm exploring the ups and downs of the paddle wheel steamer.

TINKER It's a dying breed. Take my word for it. Every last one is gonna crumple-dust-'n splinter to the mud. And, baby, there ain't no heaven for steamboats.

ROOSTER Oh yes there is!

TINKER Hi, smelly feet.

Becky laughs; Rooster glares.

ROOSTER The Empress, she's special, and if you don't drag your hide out of here
I'm gonna throw you in the river!

BECKY Rooster!

TINKER *(Laughs.)*

BECKY Don't mind him, sir. He's delinquent.

TINKER People are this, people are that,
nothing less and nothing more.
I'm a tinker with eyes like lead,
but I got a pie plate you'd adore.

BECKY No thank you. I don't cook. We have a nanny.

TINKER I see.

BECKY No, you don't—you're blind.

Tinker and Becky laugh.

TINKER Clever girl.

BECKY I think so. *(She sticks her tongue out at Rooster.)*

ROOSTER Ho-jeez.

TINKER Come have a closer look, blondie. My rope is loaded with
adventure for a girl like you. And the prices are negotiable.

BECKY No offense, sir, but this is only junk.

TINKER Pretend it's not.

BECKY Pretending's for children.

TINKER And writers.

BECKY Oh.

*During this exchange Peck pokes his head through the bramble and listens
with growing intrigue to the tinkerman. He becomes loaded with "ideas" as
the scene progresses.*

ROOSTER Ha!

BECKY Be quiet. Okay, sir, I'll look a little. But I really don't think I need anything.

TINKER Browse around. Take it slow.
And I'll tell you a story as you go

Becky begins looking through the tinkerman's wares.

BECKY I'm listening.

ROOSTER I'm not.

TINKER Imagine a riverboat captain, and a gambler,
and a certain kind of lady,
all who worked this river many years ago.
The captain loved the lady,
or as much as he could love,
and the gambler worked the tables down below.
He had a reputation for marked cards.
He had an ace up his sleeve for a certain kind of lady.
Well, one night there was a storm
which kept the captain at the wheel
while the lady painted her toenails at the bar.
The gambler threw his hand beside the discards on the table
and his eye across the room fell on a garter.
Her heels clicked when she went into her chamber.
She left the door ajar.
The storm was over in an hour
and the captain came below
to put a slug of whiskey to his needs.
He watched the gambler dealing Black Jack
from the bottom of the deck
with a certain kind of garter on his sleeve.
The captain walked over.
There was a look in his eye like thunder.
But the gambler saw him coming,
drew a pistol from his pocket,
turned and shot the captain in the leg.
But the captain kept a-comin' with a certain kind of madness
and stuck a dagger nicely in his lung.
It was a single-shot Derringer.
It was a six inch Remington blade.

The rest is history I guess
and the boatswain told the rest
about the morning after storming he went in.
The chamber was in shambles
and a certain kind of lady
was lying on her bed in a bloody mess.
The captain disappeared.
So did the lady's garter.
And the terrible name of that riverboat—
was the Empress!
A vessel of treachery.
A darling of murder.

Silence. Now Tinker pops off the top of a dangling teakettle and smiles at Becky. She reaches inside and brings out a frilly red garter. And gasps. Rooster rolls his eyes.

TINKER Something special. Don't be shy.
It's fine and pretty. For your thigh.

BECKY Where did you get it?

TINKER I pulled it off a dead man's arm who I found floating in the
river many years ago.

BECKY How much do you want for it?

TINKER It's priceless.

BECKY I'll give you anything.

TINKER Then it's yours. All you have to give me is the truth in return.

BECKY The truth?

TINKER That's what I'm asking. For that's what a blind man banks on.
Tell one single thing that you know to be true, big or small,
it doesn't matter at all, and the garter is yours for the
taking.

BECKY Well...

TINKER Going once...

BECKY I can't think straight!

TINKER Going twice...

BECKY Give me a moment, please!

TINKER Going...

BECKY Rooster!

TINKER ... going...

BECKY Help me!

TINKER G —

ROOSTER It's Clancy's Homecomin' tonight!

Pause.

TINKER False. (*He snaps the top of the teakettle open.*)

BECKY It isn't fair! You didn't give me enough time to think!

TINKER The truth come quickest when simply told.

BECKY But... (*She sighs and drops the garter back into the teakettle.*)

TINKER Sorry, blondeie.

BECKY I'm brunette.

TINKER Then you can't be trusted. As for me it's time I made my way through the darkness.

BECKY Don't step in any holes.

TINKER Nor you, sweet thing.

BECKY I don't plan to.

TINKER But I've seen more than one fair youth fall into the hole of a full-moon night without the slightest intention at all. So fair thee well ... and beware.

He taps his way off the Empress and moves slowly into the bramble. Peck, still watching, hides deeper.

My body's a bag,
My head is a bone,
I'm blind as a bat
and I've got no home.
But mamma,
Oooh, mamma,
I got some pretty things to sell.

He disappears. Peck, holding his stick like a club, disappears after him.

ROOSTER That's the biggest load of crap I ever heard of.

Suddenly Becky kicks him in the shin.

Ow! Whaddya do that for?!

BECKY You—you—you—OH! (*She begins crying.*)

ROOSTER Ho-jeez. Here we go again.

BECKY And again and again and again! You idiot! You're ruining my life!

ROOSTER It was on'y a dumb ol' garter.

BECKY No it wasn't! It was—a CLUE to my EXISTENCE! (*She cries harder.*)

ROOSTER Y'wanna see my alligator bite again?

She shrieks and kicks him in the other shin.

Ow!

BECKY Clancy's Homecoming! What the HECK is that???

She sits down hard on the railing with her head in her lap and sobs. Rooster looks at her. Looks at the moon. And then decides.

ROOSTER It's the truth, Becky. It truly is. And it's the best damn story you ever heard of, too!

BECKY (*Muffled in her lap*) Hogwash.

Rooster picks her diary off the deck and bops her on the head with it. Becky jerks up.

Don't touch me!

ROOSTER Here.

She snatches it from his outheld hand.

ROOSTER Now open it to a clean page.

BECKY What for?

ROOSTER Well yuh asked who Clancy wuz so I'm gonna tell yuh. And if it don't blow your socks off I'll be a monkey's uncle.

BECKY You're already a monkey's uncle.

ROOSTER Open your damn book. ... Please?

BECKY Okay, okay, don't rush me. This better be good, Rooster, because you're looking at a woman with a broken heart. (*She opens her diary*)
Go on. Get with it.

ROOSTER ... Tonight is Clancy Dougal's prophesy come true. He's gonna drop back down and gather his brotherly crew.

BECKY Where's he been?

ROOSTER The moon.

Becky closes her diary and gives him a big dubious look.

BECKY Is Clancy an astronaut?

ROOSTER Better'n that. He got there by the jam of his blazin' fiddle. And when he transcends down tonight he's gonna scoop the old Empress outa the mud and hang'er in the stars! Write it down.

BECKY *(Re-opens her diary and writes)* Sounds like cheese to me.

ROOSTER Cheese! Clancy's got revelation 'n inspired blueprints! We're gonna pillage and plunder from one corner of the universe to the other! Come midnight I'll be sippin' moonlight through a straw on a course for the Milky Way!

BECKY Have you ever seen this Clancy Dougal?

ROOSTER He wuz before my time.

BECKY They always are.

ROOSTER But I've got hope.

BECKY What's so big about hope?

ROOSTER "Hope is feelin' and feelin' is believin' and believin's gonna bring Clancy outa the cosmos with moonbeams on the brim of his hat and all the secrets of the universe in his sack."
So sez Peck.

BECKY *(Slams her diary shut)*

Awww hogwash! Double hogwash! Don't give me that line of cosmic turnips. If it's not between your pinkies then it's not worth squeezing. Rooster, your apprenticeship is clearly a trap and if you don't get out of it you'll be picking up Peck's blasted socks and chasing his warm milk and eggs for the rest of your days. And, furthermore, I wouldn't spend the night with you on this rotting riverboat if it was the last place of sanctuary in the whole lagoon. I'd sooner sleep in a cave! Goodbye!

She offers her hand stiffly. Rooster takes it. They shake. He steals the ring from her finger. She stuffs her diary back into her bag, hoists it, and then notices her naked finger.

BECKY Did you steal the ring from my finger?

ROOSTER Did I what?

BECKY You did! I trapped you redhanded, you hoodlum! Open up! That one—the right!

He opens his hand, sees the ring, and is genuinely surprised.

ROOSTER Ho-jeez. I did. I made a swipe without thinkin' about it.
Now don't that take the cake.

BECKY You—you—OH! (*Snatches her ring back*)
I'm only fifteen but nobody NOBODY makes a fool out of me!

She kicks him in the other shin then wheels off the deck and moves toward the bramble. Rooster leaps off the deck and tackles her from behind into the mud. She screams.

BECKY What're you doing?!

ROOSTER I'm fifteen, too, and I'm stealing you!

BECKY WHAT?

ROOSTER (*Laughs and picks her up*)
I'm swipin' your whole self, yuh big mouth! Can't seem to stop myself! You're a keeper! For me! I'm gonna take you on board the flyin' Empress and sell yuh to a Martian! Whaddya think of that?

BECKY HELP! POLICE!

He carries her struggling back onto the deck. Just then Peck comes hobbling through the bramble with a sack full of goods.

PECK HEY! Who's that trezpassin' on me private property?! Rooster!

ROOSTER I made me a swipe, Peck—ouch!

PECK What kind of plunder'n booty is that?

ROOSTER It's a keeper—ouch!—for me.

BECKY Let go of me, you—you—!

Rooster covers her mouth.

ROOSTER Pretty good, huh?

PECK No it ain't pretty good! Since when didya get permission to pilch whole people?

ROOSTER I din't know I needed permission.

PECK Don't gimme no guff, boy! Yer throwin' this one back!

Becky bites Rooster's thumb.

ROOSTER OW!

BECKY —Monsterrrr!

Peck boots him in the bum; Becky springs loose from his arms and falls to the deck.

BECKY Ooo! (*Hops back up.*)

PECK Use yer head, Rooster!

ROOSTER Aw, Peck—

Peck raises his boot again; Rooster steps back and tumbles over the railing into the mud.

PECK Aw nuthin'! Holy-moly! What would the tramps think with that panty-waist here onna night like tonight?!

BECKY Hey! Just a minute! This is a free lagoon!

PECK Beat it!

BECKY Ouch! Yooooou—!

She shoves Peck over the railing and into the mud beside Rooster. Then she stands above them with her hands on her hips defiantly.

BECKY I've been dying to do that for a long time! I'm nobody's piece of merchandise! My whole life I've been passed around, pushed around, groomed, schooled, styled, and otherwise locked up in stuffy places! I've had it up to HERE with other people's petty restrictions on my free time! This panty-waist will be here if she WANTS to be here and to HELL with what the tramps think!

Silence. Becky is momentarily stunned by her own speech and then a smile comes to her face. She looks around the boat as if re-designing it in her head. Rooster is mesmerized by her. Peck has a sly look on his face.

PECK Rooster?

ROOSTER ... Huh?

PECK Rooster!

ROOSTER What, boss?

PECK Help me up, me lovely.

ROOSTER Right. (*Helps him up*) Are you okay, boss?

PECK I never felt better, me laddie. Cuz me old milky eyes have been opened up to your own fine prowess.

ROOSTER My what?

PECK Yer smarts.

ROOSTER Me?

PECK You.

ROOSTER Thanks, boss.

PECK Stop with the “boss,” yuh nitwit. You’ve graduated into near-partnership. That you had the sheer parcel of mind to make such a good clean swipe of it—this yummy thing standin’ deck-wise above us. You got instinctive know-how, boy, but more even than you frankly put together whuls absorbed in natural swipe. And Clancy’s gonna be impressed.

ROOSTER Ho-jeez.

PECK Rightly so.

BECKY What’re you getting at, you old geezer?

PECK I’m gettin’ at this, jammy-pie—that yer standin’ onna awful slippery hunka boat there ... cuz guessy-poo-hoo what I seen tonight?

ROOSTER AND BECKY

What?

PECK I seen a cop in plain-ol'-clothes snoopin' around the docks askin' questions fer the anywhereabouts of one, bonified, runaway, rich kid.

BECKY Hogwash.

PECK Horsepucky.

BECKY My name's Belinda.

PECK Becky.

BECKY No.

PECK With a big reward stamped on her little bum.

Becky gasps, whirls, and looks desperately for some means of escape.

PECK Rooster—GRAB'ER!

Rooster hesitates.

PECK GO-O-O-!

Becky screams and darts. Rooster cuts her off and grabs her around the middle. She kicks like crazy.

PECK Now take that item and stuff it in the boiler!

BECKY No!

PECK And close the hatch!

BECKY NO!

PECK And lean on it!

Becky screams.

ROOSTER *(Struggling with her)* But, Peck, hey, why don't I just rope'er down to the hogging somewheres and—

PECK DO WHAT I SEZ!

ROOSTER Okay!

BECKY Rooster, no!

PECK And hurry up! We don't have much time left!

Rooster drags Becky to the boiler while Peck rummages through her travelling bag, mumbling anxiously to himself. He finds her diary and reads—laughs!—then stuffs it in his shirt. Rooster is trying to stuff Becky in the boiler but she keeps wriggling out—all arms and legs—like worms in a can.



*"I'm swipin' your whole self, yuh big mouth!"
Rooster (Jim Farley) grabs Becky (Bethany Ellis).
Thanks to a provincial playwriting competition grant
in honour of Alberta's 75th Anniversary, Walterdale's
production budget could accommodate a remarkable
set, including a new cyclorama upstage and mud
covering the stage. Photo: C.W. Hill Photography for
Walterdale Theatre Associates.*

BECKY Please, Rooster, save me! I don't want to be a writer anymore!

ROOSTER Don't worry, I won't let anybuddy hurt you.

BECKY But he's crazy!

ROOSTER Just think of the ring of Venus blowin' through your hair
and you'll be fine.

BECKY If you loved me you'd let me go!

ROOSTER I ain't never gonna let you go, Becky.

BECKY Then I hate you, you thief!

ROOSTER We got lots to figure out, girl. In the boiler!

He shoves her hard; she tumbles into the boiler with a shriek.

PECK Rooster!

ROOSTER Comin'! ... See ya soon.

BECKY Roo—!

Rooster slams the hatch and locks it. Then he scampers to Peck who is taking some candles from his sack and placing them strategically around the deck.

PECK Go take a watch fer them tramps whuls I make arrangements fer the party.

ROOSTER Right. Hey, Peck?

PECK Hey what?

ROOSTER Everything's smooth for Clancy's landing, right?

PECK Right. Like silk. Get goin'.

ROOSTER How come you're breathin' so hard?

PECK Fer the joy pure joy of the occasion.

ROOSTER Right.

PECK Go!

Rooster leaps from the deck and disappears into the bramble. Peck lights the candles. Becky is reaching through the boiler vent trying to unlock the latch. Peck sees and hobbles to her.

Hey! Hey! Hey! *(He slaps her hands away.)*

BECKY Let! Me! OUT!

PECK SHUT! (*He slams his stick on the boiler, echoing.*) Me and you is gonna make a little deal.

BECKY I don't make deals with strange old men

PECK Wanna bet? (*He takes the red garter from his pocket and waves it in front of the vent. Becky gasps inside*)

BECKY Mine!

PECK Yours.

BECKY Yes!

PECK —on one condition if.

BECKY If what?

PECK Glad yuh asked. Y'see, jammy-pie, them three tramps of mine is trudgin' through the bramble with their hapless hope. There gonna be here inna minny.

BECKY What the heck do I care?

PECK You vouch.

BECKY Vouch what?

PECK That you been delivered from the cosmos to be Clancy Dougal's sacrifice, magically-like, on the night of his homecomin' .

BECKY I will not be party to a swindle.

PECK What swindle where? All I'm sayin' is let's give this whole thing some class and circumstance. That yer from Venus precisely to throw yerself at the starry bandit's feet. And yer such a sweet thing of purity it could make a grown man fall on his face fer just thinkin' about it.

BECKY That's disgusting! I won't lower myself just so you can—

Peck puts the garter between his teeth and begins eating it.

BECKY Okay! ... I'll do it.

PECK Like I knew yuh would.

BECKY Poor me.

Peck opens the boiler hatch.

PECK Stick yer leg out.

Becky's bare leg comes out. Peck gazes at it in rapture. Now, off in the distance, we hear singing—the Tramps singing “Old Man River” and getting closer. Peck snaps back to reality.

PECK The tramps! They've come. I can hear'em wheezin' through the
bramble.

He slides the garter up her leg to her thighs and in the process puts his whiskered cheek on her knee. She gasps and jerks her leg inside.

BECKY You wretch! *(She slams the hatch shut.)*

PECK And you—*(He locks the hatch.)*—no fuss, stay hid, and notta word
edgewise til I sez. Then sweetly. Like an angel of certain proportions.
Y'got that, lambykins? Cuz if yuh don't that cop at the dock is gonna find
one lonely leg with a garter attached floatin' in the river.

BECKY Alright, buster—if you want a certain kind of lady, you're
going to get a certain kind of lady.

PECK I can hardly keep from cryin'.

*Rooster comes running out of the bramble and leaps onto the deck.
The Tramps' song is very near.*

ROOSTER They're almost here, Peck! What do we do now?

PECK Follow me uppity the hurricane deck. The time is come fer
prophecy to come ta pass.

*Peck reaches into his sack and pulls out a music box. Then he climbs the
ladder to the steering station. Rooster runs to the boiler and looks through
the vent just as Becky looks out. They bump noses.*

TOGETHER Ow!

ROOSTER Are you okay?

BECKY Thrilled.

ROOSTER Great! Hang on! Pretty soon we'll be up-and-away through the bedazzlin' blue hole of the heavens and never come back to this muddy ol' swump again!

BECKY Rooster, you're dangerously naive.

ROOSTER What's that?

BECKY You'll see.

PECK *(From above)* Rooster!

ROOSTER Comin'!

He tears himself away from the boiler and scurries up the ladder to Peck who is winding the music box. Carnival music bubbles out. He stuffs it in Rooster's hands.

PECK Here. Play.

ROOSTER I got my squeaky-link, Peck. It's just down there.

PECK This is better.

ROOSTER But I've been practicin'.

PECK Play!

Rooster sighs heavily and holds the music box in both hands. Peck slaps his shoulder and goes into the steering station. Rooster follows.

PECK Now ... We'll give'em just a few seconds to ripen their imagination and then we'll start the party.

Peck ducks down below the viewing frame and pulls Rooster with him.

BECKY'S VOICE

(Echoing in the boiler) Shoot-t-t! Warm milk-k-k and eggs again-n-n.

Footfalls and rustling through the bramble—Duke and Worm appear. They have sacks over their shoulders with gifts inside for their hero. They also have black mud smudged on their faces for camouflage. They finish their rendition of “Old Man River” and stand gawking at the candle-flooded Empress.

WORM Holy crow!

DUKE Tonight's the night, girl.

WORM I feel fifteen years younger already.

DUKE Lookee the moon, wouldya? It's right outa the book.

WORM High as a kite!

DUKE Bright as a honeyed apple!

WORM Painted right off the blueprints sure as shootin'!

DUKE I wonder where Guppy is? I ain't seen'im since sundown.

WORM Think maybe he din't get an invitation fer rockin' the steamboat?

DUKE My heart would bust if he got left behind by himself.

WORM Yeah, mine, too.

DUKE I ain't never seen such a beautiful sight in my whole miserable life.

WORM There's even music.

DUKE Heroic.

WORM Yeah.

DUKE Do you see Peck and Rooster? It's nearly midnight.

Now there is more rustling in the bramble and Guppy appears. He also has a full sack but his face has not been blackened. There is a slim-necked bottle dangling from his arm. He is supremely drunk.

GUPPY Old Man Riverrr! That Old Man Riverrr!—hic!

WORM It's Guppy!

DUKE Alright! We're a trio!

GUPPY Hiya, kids! (*Laughs*)

WORM Oh, no. Cocktails.

GUPPY So whutz shakin' down in the ol' lagoon tonight?

DUKE Are you drunk again, boy?

GUPPY So am I! —hic. (*Laughs*)

WORM Didya get yer invitation to Clancy's Homecomin'?

GUPPY That I diddy-do-do, Worm, but it din't say nuthin' about a circus. Where's the elephants and tigers? Is there a flyin' trapeze? I could put my eyes on some jugglers with no problem. (*Laughs*)

DUKE I'll juggle for yuh! I'll juggle yer neckbone, yuh big goof! I mean, dotcha have no respect?

GUPPY Beep beep!

WORM Clancy's comin' home!

GUPPY Toot toot!

DUKE What's the matter with you? We got prophecy on the boil and yer a plain hopeless mess.

GUPPY Well just between me 'n you and the risin' moon I'm gonna keep my suspicions on simmer til I sees Clancy come fiddlin' down. —hic!

DUKE Team. Effort. Remember? No. Make.

GUPPY Yeah yeah. Paddy-cake. So where's the bumleg and his dope? Let's get the show on the road.

Suddenly there is a bugle blast and Peck and Rooster pop up in the steering station. Peck has a bright ribbon pinned to his chest and a big smile pinned to his face. Rooster, holding the music box, looks very nervous.

WORM There they are! Up there!

DUKE We made it, Peck! We're here for the homecomin'!

PECK And glad yuh are, Duke! Welcome to the mighty Empress! It won't be long now! Clancy Dougal is just around the corner! He's inna holdin' pattern in the upper stratosphere just a-waitin' fer his musical highwaaaay! *(He blasts his bugle again)*

WORM Whuppee!

DUKE Can we approach the deck, Peck?

WORM We camouflaged our faces just like yuh said fer sackin' the universe!

Then Worm reaches down, grabs a handful of mud, and slaps it on Guppy's face.

PECK Rightly so, yuh did! And there's gonna be wonderful times fer sackin' when the time fer sackin' comes! *(He clangs the station bell)* Aaall abooard!

The Tramps board the Empress and arrange themselves in a line as Peck and Rooster come down the ladder to the deck. Guppy takes a big drink. Duke grabs the bottle from his hand and tosses it overboard.

PECK *(Looks at them—Sighs deeply)*

Man-oh-man! What a lovely crew fer the blast-off. Clancy's gonna be proud.

GUPPY *(Stepping out of line)* Hey, Woodstick...

PECK What is it, sweet Guppy?

Duke and Worm look at each other.

GUPPY How's Clancy gonna come? Did he tell yuh? Will he transcend
down inna blaze of fire? Will he paddle outa the cosmos in a
solar canoe? Will he rise outa the swamp like a dead haunt?
I mean, I figure we gotta right to know—just so's we can
cover all the angles—right?

DUKE He's gotta point there, I s'poze.

PECK Rightly so! I'm glad yuh asked. Today in extreme contemplation
Clancy told yers truthfully that his landin' wuz gonna be...
a surprise!

GUPPY A surprise.

PECK (*Shrugs*) That's what he said. Who knows? He could take any shape you
might think of—and some yuh might not think of. Why he might
materialize right inside of yer sack, Guppy, so's yuh better
not doze off.

Peck, then Duke and Worm, laugh it up.

GUPPY Not fer a second, Woodstick.

Duke and Worm exchange anxious looks.

PECK Hey! And speakin' of sacks—didya bring along yer plunder 'n
booty to lay at the champion's feet?

DUKE Yup we did!

WORM Ev'ry last drop!

PECK Now that's what I call hope. Ain't that right, Rooster, me
grand loyal swipe?

ROOSTER ... I thought hope wuz feelin'
and feelin' wuz believin' and
believin's gonna bring Clancy
outa the cosmos with moonbeams
on the brim of his hat and all
the secrets of the universe in
his sack.

PECK *(follows each of Rooster's lines above:)*

True.
Uh huh.
Just that.
Right.
Sure.
Shut!

DUKE Atta boy, Rooster!

PECK Exactly what I meant.

WORM Like a summer breeze liftin' dandelion fluff into the sky!

PECK Ooo! Well put, Worm. I can see the solar ladder in yer eyes tonight. And a little booty sure ain't gonna hurt in the form of loyalty now, is it?

DUKE AND WORM

Alright!

Duke and Worm dump their sacks of gifts on the deck: gloves and shoes, a handkerchief, a baseball, the odd wallet, a candy bar, a checker board, and various other trinkets and trifles that lay there nicely. Guppy, however, just watches.

PECK Guppy? Yer lookin' a little short, eh? No offense.

GUPPY I ain't layin' down no plunder fer no champion til I have proof of.

PECK Yer a cautious ol' bugger, ain't yuh? *(Laughs)*
But that's what I like about you. Clancy thought so, too.
... Yuh want proof? I got proof.

GUPPY Whip it out.

PECK I wuz savin' fer a surprise.

GUPPY So wuz I.

PECK You first.

GUPPY (Darkly) Peck.

PECK But if you insist ... It's this!

He pulls Becky's necklace from his pocket. It glimmers in the candlelight. Rooster gawks.

WORM Holy crow!

DUKE It's beautiful.

PECK It's a magical moonstone.

WORM What does it do?

DUKE Where'd yuh get it?

PECK It dropped outa the heavens flat on me very own skull. It had extraterrestrial postage and wuz hotter than a burnin' bun. So I cooled it off in the lagoon and wiped it clean under me hairy-ol' armpit, like so ... and BINGO! —She appeared.

DUKE AND WORM

Who???

PECK Oh it wuzza mighty revelation that fell on me head and proof that Clancy wuz comin'. This here moonstone makes it official-like. What comed from me hairy-ol' armpit put tears in me milky eyes. A beautiful sacrifice, gonna lay down her body fer the champion. So sweet! So pure! Like an angel of certain proportions. ... Rooster! Fly open the boiler!

ROOSTER (Worried) Peck...?

PECK I sez fly open the boiler!

ROOSTER ... But — (Doesn't move)

PECK (Laughs) The boy's as stiff as a cream can. All the excitement. So I'll do it meself.

Peck glares at Rooster and hobbles to the boiler. He opens the hatch and then blows on his bugle. A moment. Now we see smoke curling out of the boiler. Then Becky comes out, having used the contents of the plunder

inside to transfigure herself into “a lady of certain proportions”: her hair piled on her head, bright red lipstick, a ribbon at her throat, an earring in her nose, her dress over one shoulder and split up one thigh, sleazy nylons and the garter, a cigarette with holder in one hand and the stolen globe in the other. A stunned moment. The Tramps are speechless, including Guppy, who rubs his eyes. Rooster stares.

DUKE Look! It’s Clancy’s garter on her leg!

Finally Peck, a big smile, turns and looks. His jaw drops.

BECKY My name is Hope. Kiss the mud.

Worm cries and drops to her knees. Duke follows. Then Guppy. Rooster hasn’t budged an inch. Becky gives a big, bad wink to Peck and drapes herself against a pillar. Peck, looking around at the effect, suddenly brightens up again.

PECK *(Then with profundity)* It’s midnight, me lovelies. It’s time fer the marchin’ band. Bring out yer instruments. We’re gonna conjure the musical highway. We’re gonna bring Clancy down to play.

The Tramps plunge into their sacks and bring out an assortment of musical instruments of original and makeshift design. Rooster, looking confused, finds his concertina. Becky poses.

PECK Alright, you wretched thieves. Ready?

WORM Just a sec, Peck. I got kidney pains. If I don’t take a leak pretty damn quick I ain’t gonna be able to toot a single note.

PECK I am sorry, girl. But yer just gonna hafta hold it. Dontcha understand the calibre of this occasion. We can’t wait any longer! Let’s make music! Play the Blue Lagoon! Send a musical highway from here to the moon! ... BEGIN!

They all play. The music is grotesque but passionate. Becky shifts her hips to it as best she can. Peck brings his stick down on the deck. Music stops.

PECK Clancy Dougal played fiddle like no man alive. He could fiddle the dimes from yer pockets ten atta time.

TRAMPS CLANCY!

Silence. All gaze upwards. Nothing.

PECK ... Again.

More grotesque music, louder and more passionately. Becky begins dancing. Peck brings his stick down for silence.

PECK Clancy Dougal ate nickels, boulders and spoons.
But when he farted the sky filled up with the ballons.

TRAMPS CLANCY!!

Silence. Upward gazes. Nothing.

PECK ... Again.

Music. Passion. Becky, swirling, is completely caught up. Peck slams his stick.

PECK Clancy Dougal wuz sharper than the tooth of a cat!
He milked up the public and drank it straight back!

TRAMPS CLANCYYYY!!!

Long silence. Long gazes. Nothing.

GUPPY It ain't workin', Peck.

DUKE Where's the Starry Bandit?

WORM (*Whimpers*) I don't see nuthin'.

PECK I—I don't understand. Clancy gave me his word of honour on
the launchin' pad. ... Just a rainy! Hold yer horses! Didya
hear that?

DUKE Hear what?

WORM Where?

GUPPY I din't hear nuthin'.

PECK There it goes again! Oh me shattered soul! I'm gettin' the
shakes in me legs! I feel me bones scratchin' at me skin!

Me beans are swimmin' around like crazy! I'm gonna crack up!
I'M GONNA CRACK UP!

Peck freezes in a strange pose with a glazed look in his eyes.

DUKE Hey, Peck? What's the matter with you? What's the matter with him?

GUPPY He's frozen stiff.

WORM It's Clancy's surprise landing I betcha! ...Oh! I think I just wet my pants.

Peck starts to move and talk strangely.

“PECK” Rise O people of the swamp! This is yer captain speakin'. Yer spokesman and hero has returned. This is Clancy Dougal comin' to yuh LIVE from Peck Woodstick's very own body. That's right, folks. It is I. Yer champion. Thanks kindly for the musical highway—though it wuzza little bumpy in spots. But it's good to be back in the ol' lagoon seein' all yer hopeful faces.

DUKE Is it really you, Clancy?

“PECK” Is that you, Duke?

DUKE It's me, Clancy.

“PECK” It's me, Duke. Long time no see. Where's ev'rybuddy else?

DUKE The rest all died off. This is it.

“PECK” Too bad. I woulda come sooner but I wuz busy sackin' the universe.

WORM When're we gonna transcend, Clancy?

“PECK” Is that you, Worm?

WORM It's me, Clancy! I'm just a little bit fatter that's all. But I'm as ready as I ever was! Are yuh gonna choose yer brotherly crew now? We're all packed!

“PECK” Well, gang—I’ve got some good news and I got some bad news. First the bad news. It looks like we’re gonna hafta postpone transcendence fer a while.

WORM Oh, no!

DUKE But, Clancy, how d’ya figure that? I mean, how much longer are yuh keep yer brothers earthbounded?

“PECK” Ain’t much longer, Duke. Ten years at the most.

DUKE Ten years!

WORM T— ... no.

GUPPY (*Screams*) I MIGHT BE DEAD BY THEN!

“PECK” I know how yuh feel, gang, but transcendence calls fer special development. I barely made it topside meself. I din’t have one drop of hope left to spare and there ain’t no fillin’ stations on the way. Fact is—there’s on’y one of yuh who meets the mark even close.

Tramps WHO?

“Peck” takes an envelope from his coat and opens it. Sparkle dust falls out.

“PECK” Ooo!

Silence as “Peck” opens the piece of paper inside.

“PECK” (*Reading*) ... And the winner is ... Peck Woodstick!

Everybody slumps heavily except for Guppy who bristles and looks at Becky who is looking at Rooster who is stymied.

And now fer the good news! Peck Woodstick is stayin’ earth-bounded, too! He’s stayin’ back down by my command to teach you tramps the true meaning of transcendence. He’s more inspired than all yer muddy souls put together. He’s got prophesy and revelation in his heart and he’s gonna put all yer plunder ’n booty fer the next ten years or so to good use. Let’s hear it fer Peck Woodstick!

“Peck” claps his hands—but nobody else does. Guppy steps forward.

GUPPY (Low and black) Hey, Clancy...

“PECK” Is that you, Guppy?

GUPPY One and the same, Clancy.

“PECK” How nice. How are yuh, boy?

GUPPY Not bad. But I’d be whole lot better if yuh took a crack at yer sacrifice now.

“PECK” My—sacrifice?

GUPPY The pretty little moonstone baby.

“PECK” Oh! That! ... well ... (*Laughs uncomfortably*)
I wuz thinkin’ I’d just take’er up in one piece and save it fer a rainy day.

GUPPY I wuz thinkin’ we’d split it up right here. I mean, a little vessel virgin blood is what we need, no? Just to make it all official-like. So sez Peck.

Becky, wide-eyed, begins shifting toward the edge of the deck. Rooster puts down his concertina.

“PECK” (*Laughs*) Gee-whiz—I dunno, brother. Sounds awful nice, but I’m not sure if I got the right taste in my mouth after the long trip down. I mean—

Suddenly Guppy lunges and grabs Becky by the ankle. She shrieks.

GUPPY Since when do sacrifices cry out, Clancy?

“PECK” (*Laughs—shrugs*) Venus brand.

Guppy moves his hand up her leg to her thigh and feels the garter.

GUPPY It’s Clancy’s garter alrighty. The one he wore on his arm those many years ago. Faded, frayed, but found. Where’d yuh get it from, baby? Tell old Guppy the truth.

Becky looks at Rooster who swallows hard; then at "Peck" who snarls his lip and narrows his eyes.

BECKY I ... I found it cast on a solar wind and plucked it with my toes.

"Peck" smiles. Rooster shakes his head to himself. Duke and Worm clutch each other's hands.

GUPPY Then yuh wouldn't be opposed throwin' yerself at the champion's starry feet now, wouldya?

Then Guppy grabs her arm and throws her down on her knees toward "Peck's" feet.

GUPPY Throw yerself!

DUKE Fall flat, girly!

GUPPY Throw yerself down!

WORM Kiss'em! Kiss'em!

Becky, shaking, lies down on the deck and tries to force herself to kiss his feet. It is a humiliating experience for her. She begins crying.

ROOSTER NO! Don't, Becky, don't! Guppy! She ain't no sacrifice! She's just a swipe I made and the garter came from an old blind tinkerman who pulled it off a dead man in the river! I don't know how it got on her leg but it ain't solarized and that's the truth!

Silence. Everybody looks at "Peck" who breaks out in a cold sweat. Now Becky raises up and points her finger at him.

BECKY Rooster's right. He put me up to this whole thing against my free will. It's all a big hoax and you've all got mud on your faces for nothing.

Pause.

PECK Lookee the moon! IT'S ME!

They all look up. And Peck runs. The Tramps chase him. Becky runs to Rooster; they hug. Peck is finally cornered. He swings his stick a few times, then leaps off the boat. Guppy jumps after him and knocks him to the mud. The Tramps gather around him. Heavy breathing...

GUPPY Yuh might as well fess up, Woodstick. You been lyin' through yer broken teeth all these years concernin' Clancy Dougal. You made up the whole legend just to keep yer boney hands on the wheel and yer slimey thumbs in our sacks.

DUKE Is that true, Peck?

WORM Is that true?

PECK No! No!

GUPPY And it's my personal thinkin' that yuh killed Clancy outa jealousy and that's why the champion disappeared all of a suddly fifteen years ago and never came back.

DUKE Is that true, Peck?!

WORM (*Crying*) Is that tru-u-ue?

PECK No! I swear it!

DUKE Where's yer evidence, Peck? Yer back's up against the steam-boat now! Are you pissin' in the wind or did Clancy Dougal fiddle to the stars?

Peck looks desperately into their faces above him but can't find the words to speak. Now Rooster goes to him and kneels in the mud face to face.

ROOSTER ... Peck?

PECK Aw, Rooster. Listen to me, boy. You were me legs after mine bummed out. You were me hands after mine lost their glue. You were me eyes after mine turned to milk. Now look at us. Look at us! How we gonna steer the boat from this position? Y'gotta stick up fer me, laddie. Hope ain't nuthin' but feelin' anyhow. You can still do it if yuh try. Put it inta words. Draw it inna picture in the mud. Do sumpin' damnit before the whole thing drips away! I NEED YOU!

ROOSTER Didya kill Clancy?

Pause.

PECK I thought I did. I mean, the first time. When we wuz both young and wild and the river wuz fast. But then he came back when the river changed. We laughed at each other's scars and became best buddies in the whole lagoon. ... I thought.

ROOSTER What happened, Peck?

PECK (*More to himself now*) So long ago I almost ferget. It wuz one wee-night on the river again. When we wuz playin' onna log. We wuz drunk and Clancy fell in and got caught inna unddy current. I, uh, sorta, panicked. I watched him go down.

ROOSTER Yuh coulda helped'im but yuh din't???

PECK THE BASTARD SWIPED MY CREW!

Pause.

GUPPY That's good enuff fer me. I say we drown the murderer. Duke?

DUKE ... Alright.



LEFT: Rooster (Jim Farley) and Peck Woodstick (Frank Glenfield), May 1981. RIGHT: Peck Woodstick (Frank Glenfield), May 1981. For Glenfield, among Waltherdale's stalwart long-time directors and actors, the commanding role ranks among his fondest acting memories. Photo: C.W. Hill Photography for Waltherdale Theatre Associates.

They grab Peck and drag him kicking and screaming to the paddle wheel resting in the lagoon.

PECK No! No! Yuh can't do this, yuh traitors! I'm the captain! This is mutinyyy!

They drape him over the wheel and bind him there with long reeds.

PECK Rooster! Help me! Rooster!

Rooster covers his ears. Becky tries to comfort him.

PECK I'm doomed! I'm DOOOOMERED!

The Tramps turn the wheel over by hand. Peck disappears headfirst into the lagoon. We hear choking in water. His legs kick wildly in the air. A moment. His kicking subsides. They turn him back up in the moonlight. He has Becky's diary clutched in his hand.

DUKE Peck wuzza tramp of this lagoon.

WORM His time wuz sworn to come.

GUPPY If murder were pickles...

DUKE And cheatin' were ham...

WORM His legend would fit inna bun.

Pause.

DUKE Now what?

GUPPY It's my vote we duck our tails into the bramble and never come back.

Duke and Worm cast long looks at the Empress.

C'mon, droppit clean! Let's get outa here. Go play some poker, get cocktailed to the gills, and divvy the booty up three ways. Whaddya say?

WORM I think I'll go home and feed my skinny chickens.

DUKE I think I'll go home fer a nice ... long ... snooze.

GUPPY Suit yerselfs, yuh cruds. But don't come cryin' to me when the chips get down cuz I'll be gone.

Worm looks up at the moon fluttering with clouds racing by. Then she looks at Duke who shakes his head sadly. Her face sags and she walks toward the bramble, putting her hand gently on Rooster's head, then disappears. Duke walks up to Rooster, starts to say something—can't—and disappears into the bramble, too. Guppy, meanwhile, is stuffing all the booty in one big sack. He hoists it over his back with difficulty and walks by the portside in the opposite direction. He stops beside the twisted rag poking out of the shell. He takes a lighted candle from the railing. Gazes up at the steering station—then back across to Rooster who is gazing at the moon. He squeezes a look at the moon himself—sighs—and blows out the candle. Then he retrieves the bottle. Drinks. And disappears. The wind gathers more strongly now.

Becky begins dressing down from her masquerade; last to come off is the garter. She holds it to her cheek.

ROOSTER There ain't nuthin' left.

BECKY Don't say that.

ROOSTER Nuthin' but nuthin'.

BECKY What a terrible, terrible thought

Thunder booms above. Becky dares to go to the paddle wheel. She tries to take her diary out of Peck's dangling hand. But it won't budge free. She leaves it. Finds her travelling bag. Puts the garter inside. And then goes to Rooster in the mud.

BECKY Do you want to come with me, Rooster? We could have such wonderful times on the river together.

Pause.

ROOSTER Peck always talked about inspired blueprints like they wuz really sumpin'. And y'know what, Becky? I still think he wuz right. Ev'rything down here has its very own blueprint hangin' somewheres up there. I mean there's nuthin' you can think or do that ain't already out there in the solar system. If yuh whip down your pants and fart at a butterfly I betcha a dollar there's some starry shape that stands for it.

We hear the low, mellow sound of a river boat calling.

BECKY The *W.B. Dance* going to the sea.

She bends and kisses Rooster. Then she picks up a candle and walks to the edge of the bramble. Stops. Turns around.

BECKY Don't worry, Rooster. There is life in space. And it's us.

She takes a deep, resolved breath and disappears. The candle flickers and fades. Now Rooster stands and walks slowly to the paddle wheel. He turns Peck into the lagoon to be buried. Thunder booms and lightning flashes. Rooster picks up his concertina and sits on the point of the prow. Begins playing softly.

ROOSTER He wore the pants in this lagoon.
He had his castle in the mud.
His legs always got him from the cops.
And he took no bunk and ate no crud from nobuddy.
Now he's driftin' through space.
Sittin' on the brim of his old slouch hat.
Strange way to travel but it suits the bounder.
Goin' out for a gulp of golden moonlight.
Oh he's got business and items of mischief tonight.
He's gotta plan up his hairy-arm sleeve.
He's gonna lick the honey off the face of the moon.
You just wait and see.

He plays. It rains gently. Dim to Black.

END.



Becky (Bethany Ellis) comforts Rooster (Jim Farley), May 1981. Photo: C.W. Hill Photography for Walterdale Theatre Associates.